

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE A-1

WASHINGTON POST  
23 April 1985

# VIETNAM

## *Uneasy Road to Reunification*

By William Branigin  
Washington Post Foreign Service

\* \* \* **EXCERPTED**

### 10,000 Still in 'Reeducation' Camps

Although South Vietnam fielded well-equipped armed forces and local units by the end of the war totaling more than 1 million men and including the world's fourth-largest Air Force, the Communist takeover was so complete that no counterrevolutionary threat arose.

Instead, as many as 1 million former government officials, military men and others associated with the Saigon government were sent to "reeducation" centers, according to Hanoi's justice minister, most for a few days or weeks.

"Not more than 10,000" inmates remain in the reeducation camps, Justice Minister Phan Hien said in an interview in Hanoi. But he refused to say how many were "old residents since 1975"—in other words, detainees associated with the former government—and how many were "newcomers not worth putting on trial."

Other estimates put the number of reeducation camp inmates upward of 40,000.

In addition, nearly 1 million Vietnamese have fled the country by various means—mostly by boat—since 1975, with almost half of them eventually resettling in the United States. The Vietnamese account for the bulk of an Indochinese refugee exodus in the last 10 years totaling about 1.6 million people, including Cambodians and Laotians who have fled the Communist takeovers and continued fighting in their homelands since 1975, according to the U.S. Committee for Refugees.

Mai Chi Tho, the chairman of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City and a senior Communist Party official, blamed this "very unhappy, complicated situation" on American "economic, political and propaganda measures" directed against Vietnam.

"American propaganda made a great fuss about a bloodbath aimed at getting revenge against all those who collaborated with U.S. imperialism," he said this month in a news conference. But Hanoi showed leniency toward those "responsible for the suffering of our

people, for slaughter and for war crimes" by merely sending them to reeducation camps, he said.

"After the liberation we did not attempt to take revenge," Mai Chi Tho said. "We did not establish tribunals or secretly execute them, even though some are war criminals and should have been punished like the fascists in Europe" after World War II.

Explaining why these inmates still have not been tried, Justice Minister Phan Hien said, "If we put them on trial, they will risk a death sentence, and we don't want to have a bloodbath."

He also seemed to rule out a deal with Washington to send reeducation camp detainees to the United States, although it was Vietnam that originally proposed the arrangement.

"I believe it is not wise to free somebody if you can foresee that this guy will harm you afterward," Phan Hien said in colloquial English. "We can't release them if once they return to their villages or hometowns they create a danger for people in those places. And if now we send them abroad, we must have the guarantee that those people will not do harm to our interests. It is logical."

He said his response to the argument that demonstrations against the Vietnamese government cannot be prohibited under U.S. law was that "the CIA and the FBI have the means to avoid those regrettable acts."

Phan Hien said some of those released were "recidivists" who "committed crimes against the security of the people" after they were freed.

As an example he cited the case of former prime minister Nguyen Van Loc, who he said was released from a reeducation camp after complaining that he was sick.

"He tried 16 times to go abroad by boat," Phan Hien said, "and on the 16th time he succeeded. Then when he was in Singapore he made a statement against us, and he complained of ill treatment."

Asked why there was so much concern about such statements, the justice minister replied, "The Vietnamese are a people who don't want ingratitude in society. We want people to be truthful and constant."

Phan Hien insisted, however, that the number of "old residents" in the camps was diminishing "month by month."

According to Mai Chi Tho, "30,000 former officers have been released from the camps, including four gen-

**Continued**

erals," but he did not mention over what period. He blamed Peking for some prolonged detentions.

"The release of those people would have been much easier if we were not faced with the hostility of the Chinese authorities," he said, without elaborating.

In any case, Mai Chi Tho said, "at present, all our enemies have been wiped out of Vietnam." This has "helped the reunification of our country a lot," he said.

"We don't have any antigovernment guerrillas as in other countries in the area," Mai Chi Tho added. "We have no public demonstrations against the policies of the government. This means our security is pretty good."

Some of the regime's detractors here also think it means that the Communists run a fairly efficient police state.

Certainly, the system of informers and surveillance is so well developed that no antigovernment plots here have been able to get off the ground. Last November, for example, after a show trial in Ho Chi Minh City, 21 persons were convicted of espionage and attempting to overthrow the government with the help of China, Thailand and the United States. But the trial revealed that, although they did appear to be involved in some kind of antigovernment activity, they had not yet committed any actual act of violence.

Three of the men were later executed, two had their death sentences commuted to life imprisonment, and the rest received jail terms. The trial was widely interpreted here as a warning to southerners to toe the Communist line.

### **Montagnards in Highlands Still Fight**

Other, less publicized trials have raised questions about the extent of resistance activity. In December, for instance, three men were tried in Song Be Province for allegedly organizing underground military activity within a reeducation camp, diplomats said. They are believed to have been executed, although no announcement has been made, the diplomats said.

So far, the main armed resistance actions in the south have been attributed to Montagnards in the Central Highlands belonging to an organization called the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races, known as FULRO.

In an apparent reference to the group, Hoang Tung, a spokesman for the Communist Party secretariat, said in Hanoi recently that "elements who worked for the former regime in the south, and are now the reserve force of the CIA and China, are actively trying to create internal disorder in our society."

As part of a "U.S. postwar scheme against us in the south," Hoang Tung said, small tribal groups "supplied by China through Thailand" were "operating here and there" to carry out sabotage.

"At night they will attack a village to seize property or kill people," he said. "Sometimes they will ambush a car or a truck, but never a troop position."

\* \* \* \*

**EXCERPTED**